



Peonies *from America's Last Frontier*

*This old-fashioned flower
is all the more alluring
once you discover it's
Alaska's newest export*

Story and photos by Debra Prinzing

I flew to Alaska in pursuit of flowers. America's 49th state is known for producing exports such as oil and seafood. But sweet-smelling flowers? Blooming in July and August as far north as Fairbanks?

That news came as a huge surprise when I met two growers at a Seattle gathering of cut-flower farmers two years ago. "Come visit, and we'll show you," urged Beth Van Sandt of Scenic Place Peonies and Shelley Rainwater of Glacier Peonies, both based in Homer, Alaska, on the Kenai Peninsula. They're just two of more than 150 agricultural entrepreneurs who anticipate a big future



payoff from Alaska's climate and soil.

The state's three peony-growing regions—Fairbanks/Interior Alaska, the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and the Kenai Peninsula—are poised to blossom, and experts predict that Alaska peonies could soon dominate the global cut-flower market during the all-important summer wedding season.

In mid- to late summer, Alaska is the only region on the globe with the ideal growing conditions to produce peonies, the sentimental choice of many brides and floral designers. Long after the flower's traditional harvest in the Lower 48 states, Alaska fields are dotted with prolific rows of creamy white, soft pink and deep red peonies. This is no commodity crop, but a couture flower that wholesalers purchase for \$3 to \$6 per stem and eager retail customers buy for up to \$10 per stem, depending on availability.

Even elected officials sound optimistic about the potential of peonies. "Alaska is known worldwide as being a resource-rich state, famous for natural beauty, fresh healthy fish, minerals, energy products—but peonies belong on that list, too," says Senator Lisa Murkowski. "Because of some innovative and opportunistic work on the part of Alaska's peony growers, we are becoming a global source of these beautiful blooming buds. They're a fixture throughout Alaska, from bridal bouquets to showcase arrangements to our dinner tables, and now that we've opened the door to overseas sales, it's entirely conceivable that Alaska could supply more than one million stems internationally in 2015."

Deep roots

My weeklong tour of Alaska's peony fields began with Patricia Holloway, a horticulture researcher at University of Alaska Fairbanks who is almost single-handedly responsible for putting Alaska peonies on the floral map. It started in the early 2000s,

when Holloway included a few peony varieties in her vegetable and perennial trials at the university's small Georgeson Botanical Garden, which she manages. Holloway soon made two important connections. The first occurred when a visiting greenhouse grower from Oregon noticed the peonies and told her: "You have something that no one else in the world has."

The second was a well-known fact in trade circles: Combined, Anchorage and Fairbanks are ranked as the third-largest air-cargo hub on the planet. "For years, I had been thinking: Isn't there something we can stick in a box and ship on those planes?" Holloway recalls. The answer was growing right under her nose.

In 2001, a state agency funded a \$13,000 research project to help Holloway determine the viability of peonies as an export crop. She planted hundreds of roots and studied their performance, both in the field and in the vase. After publishing her findings, Holloway heard

from commercial buyers in Europe and the U.K. who wanted Alaska's summer peonies. Knowing that a small botanical garden's 20-by-60-foot trial grounds would never satisfy that demand, Holloway began sharing her knowledge with Community Supported Agriculture farms and greenhouse growers in the state. Many were inspired to plant their own patches of peonies, just to see how they fared through Alaska's subzero winters.

In 2005, Holloway's staff packed and shipped bunches of fresh-cut peonies to relatives throughout the United States. "We wanted to see how the flowers traveled via overnight delivery services," she recalls. "It was a great learning experience to see how the flowers endured being beaten up during shipping and left outside for hours on the sidewalk in the box." The overwhelming conclusion of these nonscientific market tests was positive.

Ever the scientist, Holloway's goal has been to test the cultiva-



Top: Shelley Rainwater of Glacier Peonies harvests an armload of peony buds on her farm on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula.

Right: Plump buds from Midnight Sun Peonies, near Soldotna, are ready for market.

tion of cut peonies. She wants to avoid a gold-rush mentality. "I keep asking: 'What are the stumbling blocks, such as insects or diseases? Is there something we cannot manage or control?' So far, I haven't found anything."

Alaska's Division of Agriculture is funding research into disease-management issues, and since the Alaska Peony Growers Association was formed in 2005, it has helped educate new growers about best practices, Holloway says. "Their goal is to make Alaska's peonies the highest quality product in the cut-flower industry."

A budding business

The APGA emerged from a grassroots group, underwritten by a \$59,000 USDA Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program grant for logo, website and market-development research. Subsequent USDA Specialty Crop Block Grants totaling \$40,000 have funded more research and marketing assistance, according to Amy Pettit, who manages the state's Alaska Grown program.

"We are really excited to see this organization come together and have early successes," Pettit says. "There is going to be room for everybody, from the small growers who want to sell to distrib-



Beth Van Sandt of Scenic Place Peonies in Homer.

utors who can market on their behalf to bigger growers who want to sell direct to large customers outside the state. There are unlimited options."

According to The State of the Alaska Peony Industry 2012, a recently published study by Holloway and co-author Kathleen Buchholz for UAF's Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, 38 growers reported having planted peony roots last year for a total of more than 120,000—more than triple 2011's figures. "Based on an industry estimate for average yield of 10 stems per plant ... [the] projected statewide harvest by 2015 is 1.2 million fresh-cut

peony stems," the study says. Sales last year totaled more than 25,000 fresh-cut stems, produced by 10 growers with plantings mature enough to harvest—it takes three to five years after planting to attain harvestable yields.

Growers shipped small quantities to Canada and Taiwan last year and many believe the international market is promising, although to date, most of Alaska's peonies are purchased by U.S. floral designers, flower brokers and individual brides who search www.alaskapeonies.org for availability. Eager to carry luscious



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peonies down the aisle, brides seem to find their way to the Last Frontier.

Last summer Michelle LaFriniere, owner of Chilly Root Peony Farm in Homer, received her most surprising request. “I was asked to supply 500 stems of Duchess de Nemours, a beautiful white peony, to a French château that does dream weddings. It was late in the season and since our farm is at an elevation of 1,500 feet, I was the only person with white peonies. I shipped them overnight to New Jersey, and the manager of the château flew

there to personally meet the flowers and fly back to France with them.”

There are few flowers that can endure such a journey, but peonies are remarkably durable, Holloway says. Long days (with up to 22 hours of sunlight), cool summers and healthy soil produce large, vibrantly hued flowers. When harvested at the bud stage, when just a small amount of petal color is revealed, the flowers can be stored in coolers for up to one month. They are then “dry-shipped” overnight to the customer. Once the flowers are cut and arranged into

fresh water or a bridal bouquet, the buds gently open to reveal huge, multipetal blooms that last up to 10 days or longer.

Romance by the bunch

Some growers thank style maven Martha Stewart for reviving peonies as a must-have bridal flower; others credit wedding blogs and social media-sharing sites such as Pinterest.com. “All I know is that for brides who want peonies in the summer, price just isn’t an object,” explains Rainwater of Glacier Peonies. “Alaska’s flowers are huge and stunning; the colors are intense. Once our customers see the flowers, they don’t care what they cost.”

Still, as a vice president of APGA, Rainwater wants to manage expectations of would-be peony farmers. “I tell them, ‘You’re going to be digging holes and putting money into them for a while.’”

The trade group defines a commercial grower as one with 500 or more plants in the ground. Rainwater estimates that about 50 farms are producing at that level, with many others taking smaller steps to get established (the association has 150 members, from hobbyists to operations that have attracted investment from major U.S. wholesalers).

Rainwater and others believe the path to sustainable, long-term success lies in the cooperative model. “Each of the regions is forming its own co-op, and if everything works out, we’ll also form a statewide federated umbrella group,” she explains.

There’s smart reasoning for this approach. First of all, a co-op creates efficiencies. “It’s frustrating for buyers to call every single farm—little or big—to fill orders, and it’s frustrating for us to field all those phone calls and emails,” she says. “It just makes more sense to pull together and keep the future of this industry with the growers, and not outside interests.”

The co-op model allows farms to pool their marketing resources, says Carolyn Chapin, a Fairbanks grower who works with Arctic Alaska Peonies Co-op, a pack-house service that grades, markets and transports flowers on behalf of several Interior farms. “Each farmer may only be able to afford a local, business card-size

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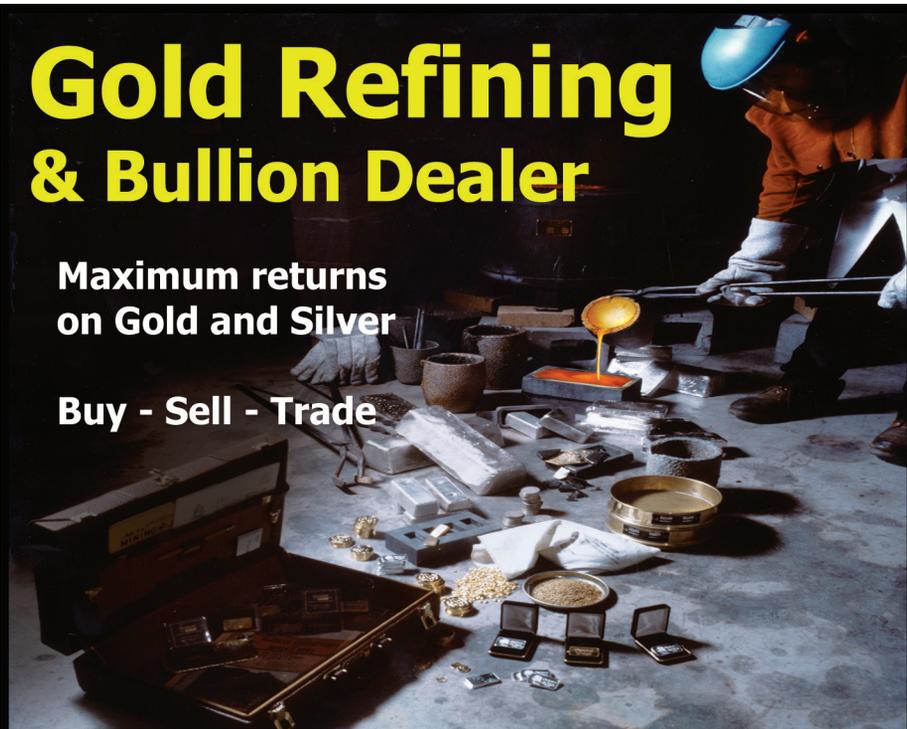
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ad, but the combined efforts of pack-house marketing may provide us better exposure and increase sales for everyone.”

At least one expert agrees with the co-op approach. “I’ve seen flower farmers work hard their whole lives and get swallowed up by middlemen,” says Ko Klaver, an independent flower bulb broker based in Maryland who serves as the APGA’s industry liaison. “I’d love to see the peony growers use the co-op model to make Alaska peonies into a trademark that every household in the U.S. knows, just like Ocean Spray has done for cranberries.”

Global blooms

With such glowing potential for these lavish flowers, isn’t it possible that Alaska will overproduce peonies? Klaver doesn’t think so, and he points to the Dutch flower auctions to make his point. “Holland sells 35 million to 38 million peony stems from late April through Memorial Day. I predict that Alaska can produce 3 million stems annually by 2020. That means in July and August, it’s a wide-open game. These growers are putting a product in the marketplace that nobody can compete with at that time of the year.”

Those quantities may lower wholesale peony prices, although Klaver expects the price to eventually hover between \$2 and \$4 per stem. “By then, the volume will offset the margins, and there will still be plenty of profits,” he adds.

For Homer peony grower Beth Van Sandt, who has 6,000 peonies flourishing in fields that overlook Grewingk Glacier, the venture is part romance and part business. “Alaska soil produces a beautiful product,” she says. “I don’t need to be the biggest, but I do want to grow the best peonies you can find.” ▲

Debra Prinzing is a Seattle-based design writer and the author of Slow Flowers.

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